

SATURDAY EVENING  
POST

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# Strangers on a bridge

A daring secret mission revealed:  
Ordered to swap Soviet spy Abel for  
U-2 pilot Powers, he gambled for  
much higher stakes—and won.

On a June morning in 1957 the FBI arrested one "Col. Rudolf Ivanovich Abel" in his Manhattan hotel room. In his Brooklyn artist's studio, they found radios, maps, code books—all the paraphernalia of espionage. Abel, whose real name was never known, was convicted and sentenced to 30 years in prison. On the recommendation of the Brooklyn Bar Association his defense had been conducted by James Britt Donovan, a noted lawyer and an associate prosecutor at the Nuremberg trials.

For much of this time Abel was allowed to correspond, through U.S. censors, with relatives behind the Iron Curtain, and there was strong suspicion that this "family" was in reality a group of agents for K.G.B., the Soviet secret intelligence. (The "family" paid Donovan's legal fees of \$10,000, which he donated to Fordham, Harvard and Columbia.)

Then in May, 1960, Francis Gary Powers, a pilot employed by the CIA for high-altitude photographic missions, crashed his U-2 plane on Soviet territory near Sverdlovsk. Talk at once began about an exchange of captives—our U-2 pilot for the Red master spy. A year later "Mrs. Abel" wrote to Donovan suggesting exactly such a deal, which indicated that Soviet authorities were interested. Meanwhile Francis Powers had been sentenced to three years in a Soviet prison and seven more in a labor camp. Would President Kennedy grant the necessary executive clemency to obtain Abel's release? Seven months after Mrs. Abel's letter to Donovan, American authorities made their decision. Here, using his own private diaries and confidential reports, Donovan tells the dramatic inside story for the first time.

into East Germany as evidence of my status and good faith. It was on Department of Justice stationery and read:

Dear Mr. Donovan:

With respect to the recent conference with you regarding executive clemency for your client, this is to assure you that upon the fulfillment of circumstances as outlined the reason set forth in the letter to your client's wife as to why executive clemency should not be considered, will no longer exist.

Sincerely yours,

Reed Cozart

Pardon Attorney

Thursday, January 25

On this morning at 10 o'clock I received at my law office in New York a cablegram from Berlin which read HAPPY NEW YEAR and was signed HELEN. The meeting in East Berlin was set.

Saturday, January 27

I took a cab to the Harvard Club to meet a Washington contact for my final briefing. I gave him my detailed itinerary for the trip, and he informed me when I could expect to receive official instructions in London.

He told me that the East Germans were holding a young American Yale student from Michigan named Frederic L. Pryor for trial on espionage charges. Before the Berlin Wall was erected, Pryor had been doing research in East Berlin to complete his doctorate thesis on trade behind the Iron Curtain. He dug too deeply, obtained some material regarded as confidential, and now the East Germans planned a propaganda trial. The prosecutor had publicly announced that as being so cautious in its wording as to be ambiguous. However, they declined the young American. It was believed that the whole affair was being publicized

Thursday, January 11

At the request of the United States Government, I attended a meeting in Washington and was told it had been determined "on the highest level" that it would be in the national interest to effect a Powers-for-Abel exchange.

"If you are willing," they said, "we would like you to undertake a mission to East Germany to negotiate the exchange."

I sent from Washington a letter to "Frau Helen Abel" in Leipzig, in East Germany, which had been her address for the past three years. I said that there had been "significant developments" which

now warranted a meeting. I concluded:

My proposal is that I meet you at the Soviet embassy in East Berlin on Saturday, February 3, 1962, at 12 noon. It is imperative that no publicity be given to this meeting by any party. Accordingly, if the foregoing meeting is satisfactory, please cable me at my law office only the message "Happy New Year."

I believed it necessary for me to carry an official letter which would convince the Russians that the United States Government would stand by my commitment to release Abel. Late on this afternoon I was given such a letter, which I criticized as being so cautious in its wording as to be ambiguous. However, they declined the whole affair was being publicized